

Book Review

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An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion In Everyday Life by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, edited by Nicholas Vreeland, Little Brown and Company, 2001

In our Zen tradition, there are many stories about thieves and fools who start practicing and “accidentally” attain enlightenment. Sometimes they merely pretend to practice, by imitating a *saddhu* in order to hide from angry villagers, but even then, their minds open up. One burglar of lore started sitting because he saw a Zen Master concentrating so completely on a famous kong-an that the Master actually turned into a cypress tree. The burglar thought, “If I had this power, no one would be able to catch me,” so he started to practice Zen with the idea that it would make him a better burglar. Instead, he woke up and eventually became a Zen Master, a different kind of criminal altogether.

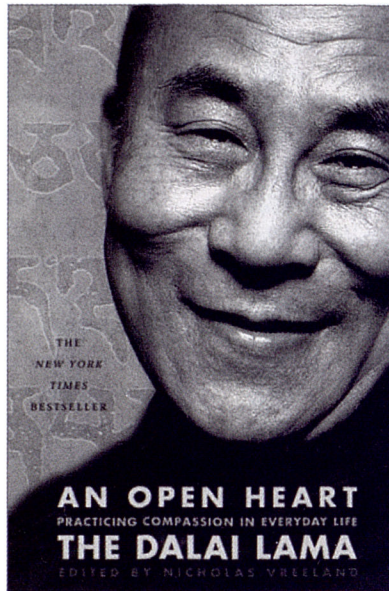
Like these thieves, most of us initially approach Buddhism with an agenda. We hope this will take us somewhere pleasurable or repair our imperfections. Perhaps it will help us dissolve our stress or become “better people.” Some find that their egocentricity is drawn to the idea of dropping the ego. Yet I have never heard a teacher say to a student, “That’s a lousy reason to practice.” Any desire that brings us to the cushion and one step closer to letting go of our opinion, condition, and situation is, indeed, a bodhisattva in disguise, showing us to the path regardless of where we think we’re going. A skilled teacher uses these ideas to help us practice.

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave a public talk in the east meadow of New York’s Central Park in 1999, he drew a crowd of 200,000 people. Although he may never succeed in getting the Chinese government to sit down and talk straightforwardly about Tibet, he is without question a true world leader who also commands a vast audience as a teacher of the dharma—and yet, what he talks about more than anything is how to get happiness. The promise of happiness and self improvement, and an escape from afflictive emotions and delusion, continue to sell his books and introduce more people to the dharma.

The Dalai Lama does not only offer happiness and escape from a mean and unpredictable world; he also offers power:

Imagine that your neighbor hates you and is always creating problems for you. If you lose your temper and develop hatred toward him, your digestion is harmed, your sound sleep goes, and you have to start using tranquilizers and sleeping pills... Then your neighbor is really happy.

...If, in spite of his injustices, you remain calm, happy, and peaceful, your health remains strong, you continue to be joyful, and more friends come visit you. Your life becomes more successful. This really brings about worry in your neighbor’s mind. I think that this is the wise way to inflict harm upon your neighbor.



Like a wily Zen Master, the fourteenth Dalai Lama draws students in with the strength of his radiant kindness and personality, and the unspoken promise that we, too, can embrace the completeness of life and smile the way he does. *An Open Heart* moves from his ecumenical speech in Central Park to instructions in beginning meditation, and onward to more advanced teachings in “generating” bodhicitta, the loving-kindness of the bodhisattva. The nature of all phenomena, even the happiness and power some will have sought in the first place, is penetrated and traced back to the mind that creates good situations and bad situations, happiness and suffering, and all other opposites.

A worthwhile examination of the differences between Vajrayana Buddhism, even in the simplified form presented in this book, and our school’s Zen teaching is beyond the scope of such a small article. The root practice outlined in *An Open Heart* clearly emphasizes a different technique than Zen:

The Tibetan word for meditation is *gom*, which means “to familiarize.” When we use meditation on our spiritual path, it is to familiarize ourselves with a chosen object. This object need not be a physical thing such as an image of the Buddha or Jesus on the cross. The “chosen object” can be a mental quality such as patience, which we work at cultivating within ourselves by means of meditative contemplation. It can also be the rhythmic movement of our breath, which we focus on to still our restless minds. And it can be the mere quality of clarity and knowing—our consciousness—the nature of which we seek to understand.

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These lectures define a course utilizing two kinds of meditation-candy. There is analytical meditation on a desired object, such as compassion (literally, "suffering with," complete intimacy with a situation as opposed to a generalized attitude of sympathy). There is also "settled meditation," which takes place after a desired change in attitude has been achieved. This non-analytical awareness of a new attitude is deepened with intensive one-mind practice.

This style of Buddhism takes what some would call an idealistic approach; instead of cutting off all thinking and perceiving original nature, this practice speaks of cultivation, of "generating" the bodhisattva mind, and using analytical faculties as a vehicle so far as they can carry you. By contrast, Zen Master Seung Sahn just told his students to bow, chant, and sit; and he admonished, "Don't make anything; then you get everything."

Are these different Buddhisms? One teacher offers meticulous technique, another says, "You learn how to climb by climbing." One offers cultivation and self improvement, another says, "If you make something, you get something." Which one will you follow? Either way, a thief is leading you. Please follow one of them until the end of time, and see what happens.

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